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ABSTRACT

Many secondary school students, poor in reading and writing skills and disinterested in academic programs, evince boredom and often distract other students and teachers with disruptive behavior. Since routine reprimands or punishments prove irrelevant and outside assignments are usually ignored, a series of resource units for teachers of low track classes has been designed with the development of literacy skills as a prime objective. Senior high units adapt course content to the students' awareness of experience in popular culture, involving them in discussion, drama, and movie and slide production with brief reading and writing assignments. The junior high program in literature and composition devotes more attention to literacy skills, both developmentally and remedially, and involves small field trips which provide material for film and classroom projects, greater community involvement, and aid in overcoming cultural deprivation. (JM)

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Introductory Note

The Educational Research Council of America, a curriculum research and development council, exists as a result of the cooperative efforts of its twenty-three member school systems (both public and private), a full-time professional staff of curriculum specialists, consultancy provided by scholars in every field, and the help and support of the business community. In 1966 ERC began work that resulted in the publication of Sequential Programs in English, Grades 7-12. At that time there was no English Department at ERC, but consultants such as Dr. James Squire, Mr. Robert Hogan, Dr. Steven Dunning, and, later, Dr. Bernard Weiss helped the teachers in Council schools in the development of a curriculum guide which in 1968 was recommended by the NCTE Committee to Review Curriculum Guides. The author came to ERC in the fall of 1968 as its first Director of English.

I.

According to the ancient Greek tradition, Tantalus, having surreptitiously shared the divine food, became immortal. For this act he was punished, and since he could not die, he was consigned to an everlasting punishment. Given an endless thirst and hunger, he was made to stand neck deep in water within reach of growing fruit. When he dipped towards the water to slake his thirst,

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the water receded; when he reached toward the fruit to satisfy his hunger, it moved away from his grasp. Above his head hung a heavy stone threatening to fall. Consequently, Tantalus lived in constant fear of his future, with his appetities unsatisfied, with relief always in his view, near at hand, but always just beyond him.

Every secondary school has a substantial number of students whose experience in school can be compared to the experience of Tantalus. The learning in their coursework is beyond reach. Their days are plagued by anxiety and frustration. Although many may escape their immediate torment by dropping out of school, the consequences of their failure to learn can stay with them throughout their lives. To continue the analogy, the irony in their situation is greater since these students have not tasted the divine food.

Schools name these students and their classes variously: low ability, basic, underachievers, noncollege, remedial, business, commercial. Whatever the jargon term that is used, the students and classes share many characteristics. Many teachers, and especially English teachers, come to recognize and to expect these characteristics in these students. The first is a low level of achievement at reading and writing tasks as a result of their failure, for whatever reasons, to have developed their skills appropriately during the lower grades. Although the English teacher is the one who is most acutely aware of these inadequacies, teachers in other disciplines are made aware of the weaknesses whenever they make assignments requiring reading or writing.

Another general characteristic is lack of interest in the usual academic program. Their personal history has shown to these students that they do not gain much from school experiences and that they very often fail even in their attempts. Consequently, the typical response to classroom activities is boredom, withdrawal, or escape into distractions which they find immediately more gratifying than the lesson at hand. These distractions are often annoying to other students and to the teacher. Very often the disruptive behavior takes on the character of a game which is both won and lost when a student is sent from the classroom. The name of the game is "how far can teacher be pushed today?"

Routine reprimands, punishments, and signs of disfavor that may be useful elsewhere have little power or relevance with these students. Low marks are especially meaningless since these students have a history of low marks, even failure. Many of them have repeated grades as a result of "failure," whether the ultimate cause of the failure be their own, the school's, or shared.

Often these students do not cherish the values of the school — quite the opposite. On the surface it often appears to teachers that they have rejected the standards and values of society in general. Many have! Certainly, few find that what goes on daily in class has much consequence or relevance to their immediate life situations.

Outside assignments are as often as not ignored rather than attempted.

When assignments are attempted, the results are frequently pitifully inadequate. In class, the student often is without a text, a pen, pencil, or paper. All too often, the student himself is not in class: he is absent from school, being detained somewhere for disciplinary reasons, or is simply cutting the class. Since he is frequently absent from class, his day-to-day experience is discontinuous and fragmented.

Thus comes the occasional student to his daily class: ill prepared, not caring, hostile, hard, without hope.

Three years ago the English Department at the Educational Research Council of America began work in developing programs to be used in such classes.

II.

Three years ago as a result of continuing seminars with high school chairmen from ERC schools, the development of a series of resource units for teachers of such low track classes was pinpointed as having priority over any other high school curriculum development project. A year and a half ago as a result of a request for help from the staff of an innercity junior high school, work was started on a complementary program designed to meet the needs of innercity youth in the junior high. In both instances our work began with a careful examination of the entire instructional problem.

It was clear from the start that whatever work is done in an English class is immediately contingent upon the degree to which the reading and

writing skills of the students have been developed. Students in these classes have a relatively low level of skills development, so that the instructional problem involves not only traditional course content but also is one of the development of the skills of literacy. As the NCTE studies relating to the training and retraining of English teachers indicated in the early '60's, teachers trained in secondary English are usually not trained to teach fundamental skills.[1] In spite of this, school administrators and the public at large expect that English teachers will do the job of training in literacy when their students' needs so indicate.

Teachers who have had the appropriate training understand the difficulties of remedial teaching only too well. First, there is a need for systematic diagnosis of each student as an individual learner; when the diagnosis has been completed, an individualized skills development program follows, and this program must contain an irreducible minimum of practice, which often takes the form of drill. The procedures involved are taxing to both the teacher and the learners; and a certain degree of program dullness is inescapable, no matter how much the classroom practice is enlivened with games, high interest material, audio-visual aids, etc.

Generally speaking, students at the junior high level, early adolescents,

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[1] The National Interest and the Teaching of English, NCTE, Champaign, Illinois, 1961 (Order No. 19704).

The National Interest and the Continuing Education of the Teachers of English, NCTE, Champaign, Illinois, 1964 (Order No. 19606).

are more amenable to practice and drill than are senior high youngsters. It was our belief that this difference in attitudes is in large measure the result of the older students having experienced a good deal of skill and drill work and not having gained very much benefit from it.

Consequently, our ERC junior high program is being designed with an emphasis on skills development, while our senior high program reflects an intention of adapting course content to students' inadequately developed powers with reading and writing.

After the preliminary analysis, we interviewed teachers of such classes, observed some of the classes in action, and interviewed students. The most striking findings, although they were not surprising, was the frequently reported feelings of inadequacy on the part of the teachers, and a general lassitude towards English class on the part of the students. The high school students regarded their experience in English as lacking in what Jerome Bruner has called "personal relevance." That is, they did not feel that their classroom experiences were "...self-rewarding or 'real' or 'exciting'..."[2] Relying, then, on the experience of teachers who have found successful approaches to teaching these classes, both as these have been reported in the literature, and as ERC school teachers have reported to us, we developed a series of resource units to be used in high school classes.

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[2]Bruner, Jerome S., "The Skill of Relevance and the Relevance of Skills," The Saturday Review, April 18, 1970, p. 68.

The units are developed around such topics as the Conquest of Fear and Confrontation: Problem or Solution? The units as a group shift the focus of classroom experience from the traditional, more or less nonparticipatory, teacher-led discussion to a highly involving, committee work orientation in which talking, drama, and the production of movies, videotapes, slide tapes, and the like receive emphasis. The subject matter content in each of these units springs from the students' awareness of experience in the popular culture. For example, the unit on the American Hero begins with the examination of the comic book hero stereotype in which students find that the hero is typically a swinging bachelor WASP who eschews beards and mustachios and wears his hair relatively short, but compensates for this with a flamboyant style of dress. While well intentioned, he works extra-legally, and only recently has begun to deal with social crimes such as drug abuse, avoiding involvement in white collar crime detection, racial issues, and draft evasion, in favor of dealing with the old style gangland criminal or spy. From this beginning the student goes on to read about various kinds of culture heroes such as those from the world of sports, figures in American history, the western hero, heroic figures who were members of racial and ethnic minorities, and military heroes. In addition to reading prose selections in the area of their interest, selections chosen because of their easy readability, students read plays such as The Leader of the People, adapted from Steinbeck's short story.

Finally, the students, working in groups, make 8mm films or slide

tapes about types of American heroes.

Reading and writing assignments are kept relatively short, and the reading materials used are relatively easy in readability and high in interest. In addition to this verbal work, the materials of the units include many films, both feature-length and the shorter films which have become so plentiful in recent years.

An important theoretical feature of the program is its emphasis in curriculum attention on the kind of experience that the youngster has as distinct from specific instructional objectives. Our analyses indicated that student attitudes were not related to the presence or absence of specific objectives in their earlier instructional programs, but rather to the character of their classroom experiences. When an instructor specifies objectives, he implies a task, necessarily. The history of these students is frequently one of successive failures at school tasks. Since their experience predicts failure in a task-oriented curriculum, we deliberately moved away from task centered instruction to experience centered instruction, a shift that has apparently been so successful in British secondary schools for students who do not plan to go on to university work.

The development of the junior high program has taken a somewhat different tack. Because these younger students have had a shorter experience of failing at the tasks involved in learning skills, and because their responses indicate a greater appropriateness of the instructional styles implied, a large

part of the program has been designed to teach the skills of literacy, both in a developmental and a remedial way. The teachers' manual includes a battery of diagnostic instruments that teachers learn to use during short in-service training workshops. The instructional materials include short sequences of programmed instruction so that remediation can be individualized readily. A good deal of the work early in the year is directed at developing skills of listening. Part of the continuing work is the correction of spelling and other writing deficiencies that result from students' dialects — such matters as spelling noun plurals, verb forms, and appropriate use of auxiliaries.

Insofar as possible, the diagnosis and the subsequent skills work is integrated into the literature and composition content of the classroom work. Generally, literature selections are chosen with an eye to interest and easy readability. The model that was followed in designing the content units was developed in large measure in the middle 60's at such Demonstration Centers as the one in Euclid, Ohio. Thus, the first unit of the year in seventh grade, for example, is a unit on the animal in literature, in which attention is given to the character of animal imagery.

The most striking innovative feature of the junior high program is probably the small scale field trips. In the spring of 1971 we piloted a number of projects that were intended to overcome the characteristic reluctance to participate in class activities shown by these students. One of these projects was a slide tape production. One of the groups planned a slide tape production

about current fashions. The mother of one of the girls in the group volunteered to take the youngsters to one of Cleveland's downtown department stores for some firsthand field research.

Their teacher arranged for the trip, and contacted store officials. The group was met at the door and, in addition to being permitted to photograph the displays and interview buyers and sales people, the members of the fashion committee were permitted to model the latest lines. Needless to say, this experience went a long way in helping overcome reluctance among these learners.

Ordinarily, the traditional field trip involves the transportation of a minimum of thirty students, together with chaperones, to the site of the trip. The conventional sites for school field trips, museums, zoos, and the like, are organized to provide experiences that tend to become somewhat routine. These trips are valuable, but if field trips are limited to groups of five or six students chaperoned by an adult, and if field trip sites include places such as department stores, stadiums, factories, and wholesalers' warehouses, students have far greater opportunity for experiences such as those shared by the members of the fashion group. At the same time, cultural deprivation is being overcome, and the degree of total community involvement, especially for inner city students, is greatly expanded.

It is still too early for systematic statistical feedback from either of these programs, and certainly too early for experimental designs to be used

in evaluating them. The response of teachers has been enthusiastic. The response of students might well be summarized by an incident in a ninth grade classroom two years ago. A group of girls who had never before handled a camera produced an 8mm movie as the culminating experience for a unit. They worked very hard in developing a script and in shooting the film. After it was processed the film was returned, a strip of black celluloid. Of course, there was frustration and tears. At the end of the year when the teacher had his classes evaluate the year's work on a lengthy questionnaire, each of these girls independently reported that her filmmaking project was not only the best thing that she had done that year, but the most rewarding experience that she had ever had in school.

It is too much to hope that all students in low achieving classes will reflect this kind of enthusiasm. But these carefully made programs, built on the assumptions enumerated above, seem to be going a long way in convincing high school students of the relevance of their English studies, and discouraging in junior high school students the reluctance that they tend to show.